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PROCEEDINGS OF THE WORKSHOP: BUILDING CAPACITY, STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY: CANADIAN FOREIGN POLICY AND NORTHERN VOICES

March 1998

International Studies Programme
University of Northern B.C.

Proceedings of the Workshop:
Building Capacity, Strengthening Community:
Canadian Foreign Policy and Northern Voices

March 28, 1998
Prince George Campus
University of Northern British Columbia

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Proceedings of the Workshop - Building Capacity, Strengthening Community: Canadian Foreign Policy and Northern Voices
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Summary:

Representatives of various dimensions of northern society, some of who are also active in a variety of NGOs, both local, national and international, gathered to discuss the relationship between the North and Canadian foreign policy. (Members of the First Nations did not attend, given a conflict in scheduling with another workshop the same day.) In this respect, topics explored included the relationship between Canadian foreign policy and a northern identity, views of Canadian foreign policy as elitist, ineffective and dominated by the US, and the permeability of local and international issues. In particular, elements of the Northern identity were seen to consist of the unique climate, industries, and lifestyles based on distances from large urban centres. International issues listed as important to the northern community included international trade, women's issues, circumpolar issues, the environment (forestry and mining issues) and the impact of globalisation.

Policy Recommendations:

- inclusion of First Nations peoples in discussions on the North and on building the capacity of northern communities;

- Northern communities to be proactive in terms of advocating their needs and promoting their views;

- create linkages within the NGO community in the North, across provincial/territorial boundaries and between circumpolar communities in various countries;

- follow-up activities to this workshop;

- improved government support for building the capacity of the North to participate more prominently and effectively in the development of Canadian foreign policy issues, while recognising also that community-based resources can also be drawn on more efficiently.

Building Capacity, Strengthening Community: Canadian Foreign Policy and Northern Voices

Introduction

On March 28, 1998 a day-long workshop entitled, "Building Community, Strengthening Capacity: Canadian Foreign Policy and Northern Voices," was held in Prince George at the main campus of the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC). Sponsored by the Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Development and supported by the International Studies Program at UNBC, the workshop brought together 45 individuals to discuss issues pertaining to Canadian foreign policy and the North. The workshop was an outstanding success. The response of the participants, which will be discussed below, is testimony to the value of efforts to develop the capacity of Northern communities to address aspects of foreign policy.

The Participants

The list of participants (Appendix I) excludes the organizational affiliations of many persons engaged in the workshop. This option was adopted as an operational policy by the workshop organizers in response to individual concerns about people being asked to "speak for specific organizations". It should also be understood that the list does not include the names of all workshop participants. Some requested anonymity. Both aspects reflect sensitivities encountered during the organization of this meeting. Consequently, the list of participants does not do justice the wealth of experience represented by the individuals involved in the workshop. Registration records indicate that the length of time that these individuals have lived in Northern BC spanned from 3 months to 30 years. The group ranged from first year university students to retired community members. The organizations that the participants are involved include Amnesty International, Council of Canadians, the Prince George Anti-Poverty Coalition, Prince George Food Security Network, Prince George Community Planning Council, Ten Days for Global Justice, Canadian Relief Fund for Chernobyl Victims in Belarus, Prince George Crisis and Information Line, Canadian Crossroads International, HOPE International, Bridgehead, Multicultural Society of Prince George, Green Party, St. Vincent de Paul Society, Immigrant and Visible Minority Women, and CUPE Local 3799. As what pointed out at the meeting, the organizers sought to secure the participation of individuals from First Nations groups, but, due to the presence on campus that day of two other large workshops dealing specifically with First Nations issues, these efforts regrettably went unrewarded.

Workshop Structure

The workshop began with an introductory session led by Dr. Heather Smith. The aims of the workshop - to encourage grass roots activism and capacity build in northern British Columbia, build links between the community and UNBC, provide a forum for the diffusion of knowledge between disparate groups, foster networks between local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and build on local initiatives - were introduced. In this session, key ideas such as democratization and capacity building were explored. We then broke into three working groups and the rest of the morning was dedicated to questions relating to "Northern identity." In the afternoon, the working groups focused on questions specific to capacity building at the local level. The day concluded with all participants engaging in a wrap up discussion led by Dr. Lawrence T. Woods and a closing dinner. A luncheon earlier in the day was addressed by UNBC President, Dr. Charles Jago.

Working Group Discussions: Morning

Discussion Questions: When you think of Canadian foreign policy, what do you think of? Do you have a sense of efficacy? Do you feel isolated? Do you think that there is a unique Northern identity? If so, can you describe it?

Responses to the first question regarding attitudes towards Canadian foreign policy (CFP) were wide-ranging, although a degree of consensus did emerge. Participants expressed frustration when discussing CFP. Issue areas such as foreign aid, trade, monetary policy, human rights were all identified as CFP issues, but the general CFP process was described as elitist, hierarchical, ineffective, inaccessible and dominated by the United States. Some argued that more democratization was necessary while others questioned the value of further democratization, raising the question, "If they are many voices involved in the process, how do we determine which voices matter?" A related question is, "Who makes this determination?"

Not surprisingly then, many of the participants expressed limited sense of efficacy. But a very important distinction was made between efficacy as related to the foreign policy process and efficacy at the community level. There was a recognition that international issues are also local issues and thus it was argued that local activism does make a difference even if we are not or do not see ourselves as directly affecting the development of Canadian foreign policy.

There was a sense of isolation expressed by the participants but the explanations for that isolation were varied. Some argued that isolation was the result of geography - that is distance from the centre. Isolation was also linked to climate. But the isolation from the "outside" did not immediately translate into a local isolation. While issues were raised about adequate services in the Prince George area, poverty rates, and unemployment, there was also a very strong sense of community that infused the discussion throughout the day.

The question of a Northern identity raised many interesting points. For some there was very much a sense of a Northern identity. This identity was equated with an independent pioneering spirit. A northern identity was also equated with they types of industries that dominate northern towns. Again, climate and distance from large urban centres were identified as factor informing a sense of difference in the North. Diversity was another characteristic noted. First Nations, immigrants, individuals who have relocated from urban centres, in addition to those born and raised in Prince George, comprise our vision of a northern community. The size of the community also seemed to affect self identification. It was commented that Edmontonians are less likely to view themselves as Northerners because of their urban setting. It was further argued that "a community focus" was more likely in centres with smaller populations, although others conceded that being small can lead to racism as newcomers or persons of different backgrounds may be more likely to be treated in a discriminatory fashion. While some participants raised questions about whether or not there was an identifiable identity, many felt that there was a Northern identity and that there was pride associated with identity. It was clear that that the North does not want to be part of the South, does not want the pity of the South and must speak louder to have its voice heard.

Working Group Discussions: Afternoon

Discussion Questions: What are the international issues important to our community? What capacity do we have to address these issues? What constraints do we face?

The afternoon session was designed to focus on the international-local nexus with the end to providing tangible and realistic recommendations for capacity building in the North. The issues identified as important to our community were wide ranging and included international trade, women's issues, circumpolar issues, the environment (especially with respect to forestry and mining issues) and the impact of globalization. The importance of considering First Nations voices, perspectives and skills was also articulated.

On the question of capacity, it was felt that more federal and provincial support for northern communities would be beneficial to capacity building generally. Financial limitations and distances between northern communities (in BC and other parts of Canada) were identified as key obstacles to capacity building. There was also a sense that we must not recreate the wheel. In other words, we must use efficiently the resources that exist in our communities.

The recommendations below are preliminary, given that the workshop marked the first time that this kind of group was brought together. Many of the recommendations listed below focus on building on already established local initiatives, highlight the resources found in the presence of the University of Northern BC, or point to the need for sustained support from different levels of government.

Recommendations

* First Nations peoples must be included in any discussions of the North and capacity building in Northern communities.

* We cannot wait for the government(s) to acknowledge the Northern existence and to legitimize us. We must define and advocate our own community needs. These efforts may include exchanges with southern communities and universities so they can learn more about northern perspectives and northern views of foreign policy.

* Northern communities should build on already established networks and work to ensure that there is effective communication within communities.

* Work to create a sense of community with NGO circles. This will help build a more united and more informed NGO community. It will also aid in building a voice and identity for the north.

* Create linkages within the NGO community in northern British Columbia, across provincial/territorial boundaries, and between circumpolar communities in various countries.

* Education and the creation of awareness of locally of the intersection of local/foreign policy issues must be fostered at all levels (elementary through post-secondary and amongst the general public as well).

* It was recommended that the federal government continue to fund workshops in smaller Northern communities. This will foster community development and greater efficacy at the grassroots level.

* Follow up-activities for fora such as this workshop are essential because they are part of a larger learning process and can only facilitate change and capacity building if they are on-going.

* The University of Northern BC, as a university of the North, must make its activities more visible to the public. The community involvement and public education efforts of professors must be recognized as worthy and valuable by the university itself. UNBC should also make a greater effort to create awareness of its diverse resources and its ability to contribute to capacity building when it comes to addressing CFP matters.

* Students and faculty at UNBC were encouraged to foster a "partnering program" with the community. This should also include course credit for community involvement.

* Encourage local media to put more emphasis on the connection between local and international issues.

Concluding Comments

The Northerners involved in the workshop demonstrated that 1) there is a northern perspective on Canadian foreign policy, 2) they understand the many connections between local and international issues, and 3) they have a wide variety of talents which they can call upon in addressing these connections. They do not all think alike and frustration with the present process for developing foreign policy in apparent. Their capacity and opportunities to contribute to foreign policy development could be enhanced and participants urged the organizers to build upon this workshop in an effort to in turn contribute to this enhancement. Improved communication between northern communities and groups will be the key to success. The momentum resulting from this meeting must not be squandered and it is to be hoped that this momentum will spillover into northern jurisdictions BC.

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